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SUBJECT: OPPOSITION PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE HOLDS SOLID LEAD
FOR DEC. 27 BALLOT; TIGHT FIGHT FOR SECOND

REF: A. ZAGREB 714
[1](#)B. MEGES-WESTLEY 12/08/2009 EMAIL

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[1](#)1. (U) SUMMARY: With less than two-weeks to go before the first round vote in the presidential race, the most reliable polling numbers suggest that Ivo Josipovic, candidate of the main opposition Social Democratic Party (SDP), is certain to make the second round runoff. (REF A) The race for the second slot in the January 10 vote is up for grabs and any of four candidates -- independents Milan Bandic, Nadan Vidosevic, or Dragan Primorac, as well as the ruling Croatian Democratic Union, s (HDZ) candidate Andrija Hebrang -- has a chance to reach the second round. The campaign, meanwhile, is turning negative, especially among Primorac, Vidosevic, and Hebrang, who are all former HDZ colleagues. The determining factor in which of the four candidates faces Josipovic in the run-off could well be the Croatian Diaspora vote. END SUMMARY

[1](#)2. (U) Recent polls from Croatia's two most reliable polling firms -- PULS and PromocijaPlus -- have been telling the same story for the past several weeks. Averaging the firms' combined ten polls from the past six weeks, Josipovic is likely to receive about 27 percent of the domestic vote. Bandic is at about 15 percent, with Vidosevic at 14 percent, and Hebrang about 10 percent. Additionally, the number of undecided voters is trending down and is likely less than 10 percent at this point. Primorac is the one candidate who has shown a consistent upward trend in the polls and may do better than his 7 percent average. One surprise in these polls is that Bandic so far appears to have failed to gain much traction with voters. Many commentators and diplomats had assumed that Bandic's populist style and indefatigable campaigning would earn him more momentum than has appeared in the polls so far. Also somewhat surprising is Hebrang's consistently poor showing. This may be a result of ex-HDZ members Vidosevic and Primorac, and to a lesser extent Bandic, eating into the traditional HDZ voter base. But polls may also be underestimating Hebrang's support. He is most popular in rural areas, where HDZ loyalty is the strongest, and the HDZ has by far the best voter turn-out machinery of any political organization in the country.

[1](#)3. (U) None of the polls capture the Diaspora vote. Based upon past presidential elections, Diaspora votes should add about 80,000 to 100,000 total votes to the mix -- primarily from Bosnia-Herzegovina. Almost none of these are likely to go to the SDP's Josipovic. Depending on overall voter turnout, the Diaspora vote could put 4 to 5 percentage points up for grabs, primarily between Hebrang and Bandic. Furthermore, the timing of the first round vote, December 27, may make the Diaspora vote all the more important. Traditionally, many more affluent Croatians -- typically supportive of the SDP -- go abroad on ski vacations after Christmas. At the same time, some Diaspora Croatians from

Western Europe, who are generally more supportive of the HDZ, will return to Croatia for the holidays. In a race where there is less than 1 percentage point difference between Bandic and Vidosevic, the addition of a few extra percentage points via the Diaspora vote could well propel Bandic or even Hebrang over the top.

¶4. (SBU) As the presidential race enters the final stages, the public may be getting bored with the cast of candidates. It has been underway unofficially for nearly six months, which is long by Croatian standards. A recent poll by Transparency International found that less than 15 percent of Croats polled believe that politicians of any stripe make decisions based on the best interest of the country, while nearly half felt politicians only make decisions that are best for themselves.

¶5. (SBU) Numerous commentaries have noted in recent weeks that the campaign has gone from dull to dull and negative. Policy issues have been largely absent, despite an effort, particularly by Josipovic to stress the need for a greater focus in Croatia on anti-corruption efforts. Instead, almost all of the debate has been about personality and character issues. In an early December TV debate, Vidosevic alleged that Primorac, a former Minister of Education, is rumored to have beaten his wife and past girlfriends. Primorac has countered with accusations of slander and alleged that Vidosevic -- who is quite wealthy -- is a crook who should be investigated and convicted of embezzlement. In the same debate Hebrang was combative and aggressive, accusing both Primorac and Vidosevic of an absence of patriotism and a failure to show real courage during the 1990s war. Arguably, the only candidate to come out well from the debate was Bandic, who did not participate and was thereby able to avoid the mud slinging. Another national TV debate will be on

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December 22, and will give the top candidates one last opportunity to sway undecided voters before they go to the polls.
FOLEY